

1-1-2010

Teaching online: Not for the faint of heart

Robert W. Hill

Nova Southeastern University, hillr@nova.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://nsuworks.nova.edu/fse_facarticles



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

NSUWorks Citation

Hill, Robert W., "Teaching online: Not for the faint of heart" (2010). *Fischler College of Education: Faculty Articles*. Paper 20.
http://nsuworks.nova.edu/fse_facarticles/20

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Fischler College of Education: Faculty Articles by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.

Teaching Online

Not for the Faint of Heart

Robert Hill

INTRODUCTION

From the title, I am sure some of you are snickering to yourselves and not too sympathetic for the online professor who teaches courses from home while still in his pajamas with an unshaven face. You may be surprised to hear it is not as easy or as laid-back as it sounds! In fact, it is hard work and requires organization and self-discipline to pace oneself throughout the semester and academic year.

I have been in education some 28 years, with 10 years in high school and the rest in higher education. I have taught undergraduate students (both traditional and nontraditional) as well as master's degree

courses and now courses at the doctoral level. I have utilized various instructional delivery systems from teaching live classes to facilitating guided-independent study classes intended for self-directed learners, to teaching hybrid or blended classes. Now I teach full-time, almost exclusively online classes to students pursuing an EdD degree online. Students live across the country, and there is even an occasional international student thrown into the mix.

I certainly do not profess expertise and will not proffer "best practices." Teaching, no matter what the level or delivery mode, is considered by many to be as much an art as it is a science. However, effective teaching online, not merely passively responding to e-mails or grading students' assignments, but engaging the students and fostering an online learning community is not something to take lightly. Online teaching is not just another education trend, but a phenomenon that is here to stay, at least if any of the multitude of reports recently released are accurate. More and more colleges and universities are moving their courses online and students (undergraduate and graduate) do seem to like the convenience and flexibility that online learning provides them; so I thought I would share my thoughts from behind the screen where I typically sit.

Yes, the obvious advantages are that when teaching online I am not commuting during rush hour sitting in traffic burning fossil fuel to get to class. On the plus side, I do not even have to iron a shirt anymore or put on a tie. I work and teach mostly from my home. Working at home did



Robert Hill,
Program Professor, Higher Education Leadership,
Fischler School of Education and Human
Services, Nova Southeastern University,
1750 NE 167 St., North Miami Beach,
FL 33162. Telephone: (954) 262-8613.
E-mail: hillr@nova.edu

require me to get a set routine down. Earlier in my teaching career, I learned just how vital wearing good, comfortable shoes could be. Now I cannot emphasize enough just how important an ergonomic home office chair is as the place where you sit for countless hours each day. Once your workstation is configured appropriately, you suddenly discover the need for a second computer in the house to quiet your spouse and children from their perpetual (albeit innocent) requests for computer access to check their e-mail right when you are in the middle of a critical instructional activity.

I had to learn how to teach a live-class session (without my normal loud and enthusiastic classroom teaching voice) while sitting tethered to a headset with a microphone and discussing a PowerPoint presentation through Elluminate. I can now multitask by reading public and private instant messages while talking to the class. Mastering, not merely knowing a little about, various software programs is imperative. They are tools of the trade. Just when I felt I had mastered all the “bells and whistles” of WebCT, my university migrated to Blackboard and I encountered a host of new challenges.

While most faculty generally require their students to post an introduction during the first week of the term, I also suggest including a picture. I start by posting my own picture for the class. Most students follow my example and attach a recent picture of themselves to their introductions. I print these documents out and keep each class’s set in a binder next to my computer. It helps me to learn the students’ names and focus on them as people rather than as distant voices. I hypothesize that the students are more engaged when they know a little about their classmates.

Many of my colleagues do not choose synchronous instruction, perhaps either in fear of forging ahead with new technology or due to a reluctance to compel students in various time zones to log on at a set day

and time. However, if you choose to do so, synchronous sessions must be worthwhile because they are interactive. I also record sessions. If any of the students cannot attend live, they always have the option of hearing and viewing the session at a later time. I usually have these students submit a written summary of these sessions to me. Students often want synchronous online instruction and discussion, and I try to accommodate these wishes. I also need to know that I *am* teaching. The interaction affords me feedback.

Trial and error may be the only way to become truly effective at teaching online both synchronously and asynchronously. For example, I had always thought of myself primarily as an auditory learner, but teaching online showed me just how visual a person I actually am. Now I regularly use bold, italics, underlining, different fonts (sizes and colors), and many graphics to pepper my presentations. For instance, I teach a course on the history of higher education, so now I routinely include pictures of the early colonial colleges and of the important people who have influenced higher education. Putting together a good, dynamic PowerPoint presentation does take time, but making it an effective display on the whiteboard section of your course management system is even more challenging.

I get curious glances from my neighbors when they see me outside walking to my mailbox or taking the dog for a walk around the neighborhood during the middle of the workday. They do not know that I signed off the computer the previous night around midnight or that I have already been on it for a few hours that morning. Online students work at all hours. Students need good, clear instructions and assignments. More important, they need effective and frequent feedback on their academic work. As a full-time faculty member, I go into my courses several times a day. Although I read almost all of their postings and course e-mails or

messages immediately, I may wait half a day to reply so that they do not always expect an immediate reply. I also like to stir things up on the discussion board with the weekly threaded discussions and will often post a differing point of view or a controversial article from the news. Each morning while sipping my coffee, I check to see what may have come in during the night hours. Often, no matter how late I may have replied or posted, there is still something sitting there awaiting my review and reaction the next day.

Getting electronic versions of students' papers instead of hard copies is definitely more environmentally friendly, but I confess that I find it cumbersome to electronically insert comments. Some of my faculty colleagues have mastered this technique; however, since I am already on the computer more than I care to be, I often drive to my university office to do two things (besides attending regular committee meetings) and that is to print out hard copies and then scan students' papers once I have completed the grading process.

While during the course of my academic career I have made considerable technological strides, I confess that I have yet to totally master the "paperless society" concept. I find it easier to print out my students' papers and then position myself either at my dining room table or outside on the back patio (if it's not too hot in South Florida) with an actual hard copy in hand so that I can write on it as needed. I then scan the paper, replete with my comments, along with the completed assignment rubric into a PDF file document that I upload with my typical "Dear So & So—Please see the attached file for comments and feedback on your recent assignment. Best wishes!"

I marvel at today's office copiers that are sophisticated enough to take a paper, scan it, and e-mail it back to me. I can then save it to my desktop and later upload the file in the course's "assignment drop box" as it even populates the grade book with

the points the students earned. This system seems to work for me and I do not have to pay for paper or toner cartridges!

Aside from the initial phobia and the sheer loneliness of the workday, the hardest thing about teaching online is effectively infusing a collaborative or team assignment into courses. A part of our Southern Association of Colleges and Schools' (SACS) reaffirmation of our university's 10-year regional accreditation is the *Quality Enhancement Plan* or *QEP*. In our particular *QEP*, our university has adopted "enhancing student academic achievement" as a theme in our various colleges and academic centers, and we have introduced problem-based learning as a means for increasing academic dialogue and discussion among faculty and students. As a result, the faculty have been asked to add a collaborative assignment so that the students work with their peers. I have found that online collaboration is even more difficult for students who do not like working in teams for a graded assignment. However, there is new research on how to promote collaboration, and the course management platforms all provide mechanisms for the students to meet online without the need for the professor to be present serving as a facilitator. If we truly want our graduates to become change agents in their own organizations, they need to learn how to work together successfully in teams.

I am sure my eyesight has gotten worse over the last few years. I have recently developed carpal tunnel syndrome in one of my wrists and now sleep with a brace to stabilize the condition. I have discovered that a blended class offers the best of both worlds—at least for me—and I would opt for that approach over an entirely online class. I simply enjoy being in an actual classroom interacting personally with students. However, I am now confident about what I am doing online and that my students are getting a good educational experience.

Colleges and universities certainly need to focus more on professional development related to online teaching and learning because many faculty are overwhelmed by the technology. While information technology people can be great, we also need experienced faculty teaching and mentoring their peers. Faculty know the specific concerns and issues that arise since they themselves are users of this medium. Therefore, with apologies to the award-winning American writer

Pearl Buck who once wrote, "Only the brave should teach," let me now paraphrase, "Only the brave should teach online."

Editor's Note: A portion of this article was published in the November 4, 2010, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in the article "Instructors' Vantage Point: Teaching Online vs. Face-to-Face."

"ONLY THE BRAVE SHOULD TEACH." —PEARL BUCK

"ONLY THE BRAVE SHOULD TEACH ONLINE." —ROBERT HILL